

10 ways to stay healthy in these unhealthy times

Written by Dr. Ted Jablonski on March 23, 2020 for CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca

Spread love, not the virus: How to stay healthy in mind and body during COVID-19

Despite being a newly semi-retired consultant, I now find myself acting as an administrator, leader and front-line clinician in managing COVID-19 in Calgary. Here are 10 thoughts based on my own observations over the past few weeks.

Health, as defined by the WHO, is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Using this definition, we are living in very unhealthy times. Not news to any of us.

So how do we stay healthy?

Be wary of the COVID-19 media black hole. Keep up-to-date with all the issues in your city or community, province, country and world BUT not at the exclusion of everything else. Currently reviewing the news could take hours a day; keeping up with social media could easily be a full-time job. Add in all the daily medical updates from medical associations and we could be putting in 12-hour days without even standing up and closing our laptops. This is NOT a sustainable, healthy activity. We need to set strict limits on this or it will consume us. This is probably the most important consideration particularly if we are in self-isolation, or limiting our time at work. Any free time, which paradoxically could be much more than we are used to in these next few weeks, could easily be filled up with an unending stream of numbers, theories and mounting fears. Put in limits and boundaries, now!

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Trust our medical leadership. Now is not the time to undermine our medical leadership unless we are willing to do their job. These are exceedingly challenging times to be a leader. We are in uncharted territories heading towards the abyss. In Canada, we have had ample warning from our international colleagues and our best medical experts are listening closely to their advice. I am listening.

Keep communicating. Communication is ALWAYS critical, now more than ever. This is not the time for fear-mongering and expounding personal opinion loosely based on some anecdotal experiences. Now is the time for listening carefully, communicating clearly, sticking to vetted protocols and algorithms and working as a team. We will all feel stronger as individuals if we work together as a unified team. Our approach needs to be based on science, not hearsay; healthcare professionals are not immune to Facebook hysteria.

Change what you can. More than ever, as it feels like the world is crashing down on us, there are things within our control and things that are not. Being concerned to the point of aggravating generalized anxiety or getting panic attacks over what is happening in Italy or Iran will not change anything. Social distancing and meticulous hand-washing will. Losing sleep right now over Canada's economy will not change our GDP, but proper use of PPE can and will reduce our risk in dealing with a high-risk patient. Regardless of holidays and plans, now is NOT the time to travel. This is fully within our power, and we need to make the right decisions.

Reach out to friends, neighbours and family. Social distancing (better termed physical distancing) does not mean social isolation. If someone is currently quarantined or in self-isolation, now is the time to reach out. Simple acts of kindness such as getting mail or basic groceries for them might make a real difference. I've heard a few ugly stories of "public shaming" as the fear and hysteria are rising. This is the time to focus on the positive, not be negative and lay blame; it is a time to build a stronger community. Let's not waste this opportunity to come together despite fear and isolation.

Exercise regularly. If you are "low risk," COVID-19 screen negative and asymptomatic, get outside. If sidewalks or pathways are safe and clear of ice and snow, why not go for a run, walk, or cycle? Just get out and enjoy! If you are on quarantine or self-isolation, get your routine going in your home, no matter what it may be. I have an elliptical machine, my road bike on a trainer and I am a believer in the "seven-minute work-out." This simple program incorporates high-intensity interval training or HIIT. All of your major muscle groups are engaged with just your body, a wall and a chair. You're on your computer anyway. Google it and see what I am talking about.

Pursue your hobbies without guilt. Now is the time to catch up on many of the things you keep putting off, particularly if you are stuck inside your home. Dust off the guitar (hope the strings aren't too rusty) and get going. Learn another language—this travel ban is not going to last forever. Sing, paint, write—whatever you never seem to have time for. My wife has taught me how to do Sudoku, something I said I would never do! Start on that art project that you've been thinking about. If your children are out of school, this is a spectacular time to be creative and have fun; time for "bricolage," as my grand-daughters call it! Just like us, kids could spend hours and hours on their computers obsessing over social media and getting increasingly anxious and moody over the perpetual doom and gloom or twisted black humour. Let's change that up!

Live one day at a time but plan for weeks down the road. From an administrative point of view, our primary care network has been trying to work through best and worst-case scenarios long before they occur. By doing this over the past month, we have collectively decreased our worry and concern and improved the mental health of all who will be involved as this pandemic plays out. I am not saying we got it all right, there is so much more we will learn in the next few months, but I feel a lot more prepared and realistic about the challenge before us.

Smile and laugh—not in serious clinical situations or inappropriately with patients, staff or stressed colleagues, or course; I am saying to smile and laugh when you can. While the glass half-empty, the half-full analogy is probably looking more like knocked over and spilt. We have to try to lighten up and focus on the positives. Our patients need to see us calm and confident. Our friends and families need to see us managing in very challenging times. Sometimes just taking an extra second to smile, wave and offer a show of support (no hugs of course!) goes a long, long way.

Love one another. We are all in this together. The majority of us will make it through alive, although I dare say we will all be changed by this virus. So supporting and loving one another in as many ways as we can, might help all of us get through this. Spread love, not the virus!

Together we can remain healthy if we choose to; this is not just a passive naïve dream. We must continue to act quickly and decisively as individuals and physician groups across this country. We are only one of many crucial groups managing this pandemic. In order to fight, we must stay as healthy as possible—mentally, socially and physically. Please be kind, stay safe and stay healthy!

Dr. Ted Jablonski is a singer-songwriter, emerging playwright and neophyte poet who has recently retired his family practice to focus on sexual medicine and transgender health in Southern Alberta. He now finds himself back on the front line trenches leading the charge.
